



COPS in Action

Community Oriented Policing Services

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Sonoma County, California



The Sonoma County Sheriff's Office (SCSO) serves a population of 155,000 in unincorporated Sonoma County, just north of San Francisco. The SCSO has received \$1.5 million in COPS funding to hire or redeploy nearly 30 officers and address domestic violence issues.

Sonoma County has had particular success in their efforts to combat domestic violence. In 1996, the Domestic Violence/Sexual Assault (DVSA) Unit of the Sheriff Department was created with a COPS Domestic Violence grant. The grant assisted in the creation of a network of law enforcement, non-profit organizations, and government agencies to respond to and prevent domestic violence and extend services to victims. The primary coalition created to ensure a comprehensive approach to fighting domestic violence was between DVSA officers, the YWCA and the District Attorney's office. These entities joined forces and offices to create a center devoted to improving investigations, providing advocacy and counseling, and increasing education and prevention measures.

When a domestic violence call is received, a DVSA officer, who has been trained in managing domestic violence disputes, is dispatched to the scene to respond to the situation. Each case is immediately assigned a YWCA advocate to offer counseling and safe-house services to the victim. In cases of felony domestic violence, a DVSA detective is also assigned to the case. All parties then work with the DA's office to assist in successfully prosecuting the offender. Prior to the creation of this network, victims bore the responsibility of finding and seeking services. The sharing of information in this network has improved the quality and effectiveness of services provided to victims.

The DVSA unit emphasizes early intervention and prevention. The unit reports on every domestic related incident (DRI), even

if no charges are warranted. Detection of these incidents is usually a result of neighbors calling in with concern or noise complaints of arguing couples. The DVSA unit seizes these opportunities to take preventative measures. The DRI report that is generated from the visit is reviewed by officers to determine if there are any safety issues that need to be addressed by the unit. The couple is then contacted by a YWCA advocate and offered counseling services. The DVSA unit also promotes prevention through education. Officers regularly visit schools and participate in community activities and discussions promoting domestic violence awareness.

The efforts of the DVSA unit have proven effective. There has not been a domestic violence related homicide in SCSO's jurisdiction since the introduction of the DVSA unit. In 1998, incidences of domestic violence fell 19%. Cases in which the victim was physically injured dropped 30%. Perhaps even more telling of the program's success, 1998 brought a 39% reduction in recidivist couples. The SCSO is sharing their success by training neighboring counties and police departments how to effectively combat domestic violence.

Sonoma County has adopted community policing principles throughout the department. With the receipt of a COPS grant in 1995, SCSO was able, for the first time, to dedicate officers to community policing duties. A special community policing unit, COPS AHEAD, was created to work in partnership with the community to address persistent crime problems and seek long term solutions. Fundamental to the success of COPS AHEAD are the department's partnerships with the community and local organizations. COPS AHEAD officers work with neighborhood watch groups and respond to their complaints of speeding, vehicle abandonment, and trash dumping. They work in partnership with local agencies to condemn substandard living conditions and extend services to residents. They teach DARE courses in schools and work closely with the Narcotics Division to curb the use, sale and manufacture of drugs. These efforts have made an impact. Despite its growing population, Sonoma County has recorded significant drops in both violent and property crimes since 1995.

"Without the assistance of COPS grants, we would not have been successful in significantly reducing domestic violence in Sonoma County."

Detective Sergeant Richard Sweeting
Domestic Violence/Sexual Assault Unit,
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